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Two Feet and a Heart Beat: The Canadian Professional Identity Crisis in Community Disability Services

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Abstract

The struggle for professional identity in the human service professions is not new. More established professions such as psychology and social work can attest to a long, philosophical battle, often political in nature, in the pursuit of professional regulation, licensure, and certification. Historically, in Alberta, the community disability services workforce has been small in number, fragmented, and untrained. More recently, this workforce has been acknowledged for its interdisciplinary knowledge and training in community development, rehabilitation processes and strategies, and inclusive practices for supporting individuals with disabilities to be part of community. The article examines the quest for professional identity of direct service workers. Further, it presents ideas on initiating the development of a professional association that warrant further investigation.

Disability services fit within the larger field of human services, which broadly defined, provide a distinct approach to meeting human needs by drawing upon an interdisciplinary knowledge base. Disability services focus on prevention as well as remediation of problems and entail a commitment to improve the quality of life of individuals served by the system. As such, the human services profession is one that promotes improved service delivery systems by addressing not only the quality of direct services, but also by seeking to improve accessibility, accountability, and coordination among professionals and agencies. Disability service workers are found in a variety of not-for-profit, for-profit and government organizations serving individuals with disabilities. Community support workers, rehabilitation practitioners, client services coordinators, and direct support workers job titles, a few among many that are assigned to those working in this sector. While the job titles are not consistent, the work and job responsibilities are somewhat standard. Workers are supporting individuals with disabilities to live full, meaningful, and productive lives in the community.

In Alberta, the Community Disability Services (CDS) sector currently serves approximately 15,000 clients and employs approximately 17,000 people (ACDS, 2006). The focus is on supporting people with developmental disabilities. This workforce supports individuals with disabilities and their families to live and participate in their communities. Since the de-institutionalization of services in the late 60's and 70's, the quest for a qualified disability services workforce has been paramount. During the de-institutional era, the emphasis was on the development of alternative schooling options outside of institution-

al walls, residential placements, and workshops to provide life-skill and vocational training for those displaced residents. Furthermore, training for this disability services workforce, mainly by non-profit organizations, focused on a coordinated, comprehensive approach to upgrade skills for direct service workers. Consequently, little attention was paid, or acknowledgement given, to the development of the professional identity for disability service workers to support a chosen career path. Being a disability service worker was, and to some extent still may be, a job rather than a long-term career (Murphy-Black, Hillyard, & Riediger, 2005).

In the '80s and '90s the field, then known as community rehabilitation, grew rapidly and human resources issues such as low wages, high turnover, and poor qualifications of disability workers emerged just as quickly. The crisis of finding qualified staff caused the phrase "two feet and a heartbeat" to become coined by community service providers; frustrated that they may have to take anyone "standing and breathing" off the street to work in the field. Community service providers, government, and post-secondary training institutions endeavoured to address these issues and to create a way for disability service workers' to establish career paths. An early grassroots initiative to establish a professional association emerged in the early '80s. The Alberta Association of Rehabilitation Practitioners applied to the then Alberta Health Occupations Board (AHOB) to be regulated. However, because the Association had fewer than 100 members of an approximate 1400 possible members, the AHOB felt they could not support regulation as the Association was not seen to speak for the majority of practitioners in the province. This was disappointing to the volunteers who spearheaded the effort. The Association disbanded not long after this citing lack of interest, lack of infrastructure and lack of a paid executive to support the work.

In 1998, the recently formed Alberta provincial department, Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD), became a collaborative partner for the "Community Rehabilitation Workforce Strategy." The Alberta Council of Disability Services (ACDS), (formerly AARC), in conjunction with a Provincial Advisory Committee, spearheaded *Workforce 2010*. Workforce 2010 encompassed five separate, but related, projects: the work, the workforce, the individuals, the employers, and public image. These ongoing, interrelated projects were designed to comprehensively examine the labor market issues in the community disability services sector.

This article will explore how human resources issues in the field of disability services are being addressed. Further, it will contribute to the discussion regarding the merits of a professional association that will contribute to a professional identity. Two examples of professional associations in Alberta are outlined with a national alliance in the United States for direct support workers investigated as a potential model for Alberta. In addition, obstacles in the development of a professional association are identified, specifically, the perceived threat of unionization for community service providers. Finally, conclusions of "what next" for the disability services workforce are examined.

Addressing the Issue of Poor Qualifications

Basic Skills Training

In response to a large unskilled workforce, with low wages and limited access to post secondary education alternatives, the Community Rehabilitation Careers Project (CRCP) was developed. Coordinated by the Alberta Association for Rehabilitation Centres (AARC), on behalf of all service providers, the CRCP produced a job classification and evaluation process, human resources administration training, and a model for a personnel policy manual. In addition, a "Basic Skills Training" (BST) program for new recruits to the field was initiated in an attempt to bring at least some training to every person who was hired. BST seemed to be a reasonable alternative to address some of the training issues due to limited access to post-secondary education. Even though training centered on basic skills, BST was developed in the context that some training would inspire those workers who completed this training to pursue further education. To that end, many post-secondary institutions recognized BST and credit was offered toward the two-year diploma in community rehabilitation and disability studies. This BST training program has

gone through a number of changes and is now known as "Foundations." It is available in both a face-to-face tutorial format and on-line. This training program ladders into Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies two-year diploma programs at several Alberta colleges.

Post-Secondary Education

Across Alberta, the issue of qualifications was delegated primarily to post secondary institutions who took a career ladder approach to education. Students were able to complete a one-year certificate or a two-year diploma at local Community Colleges and graduate as a "Rehabilitation Practitioner." The Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies program at the University of Calgary partnered with the Alberta Community Colleges to build on these credentials and students were able to earn a Bachelors degree in Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies (BCR) by completing an additional two years of study. Post secondary institutions developed ways to recognize prior work experience and skills using a prior learning assessment process, accounting more fully for previous work experiences completed by students towards post secondary credit.

Defining qualifications for community disability services and providing access to educational opportunities was one step in the *Workforce 2010* initiative, *An Action Plan for Building People Capacity*. This initiative aimed "to attract, retain, develop, and engage people in the industry" (ACDS, 2008, p.5). Another recommendation, and the impetus of this article, was to establish a professional association for disability service workers. This association was to begin to instill a sense of professional identity and collegiality in the community disability services field.

The Connection to Professional Identity and a Professional Association

Community disability services (CDS) is at a crucial point if the field wants to keep qualified staff and promote the occupations of disability services as an important career path. In a field driven by humanistic values, the CDS professional is empowered to assist the people they work with in self-determination. The desire for their own self-determination has shifted their thinking from "workers" to a "professional" mentality and wanting to pursue a professional identity as part of that "professionalism" (Hennessey, 2001; Mpofu, 2000). Individuals attracted to the CDS field are seeking intrinsic value of their profession and life choices (Wolf-Branigin, Wolf-Branigin, & Israel, 2007). Community disability services professionals are not alone in their quest to secure a professional identity. Many social and political reasons have driven professionals in the human service field to find and identify the features that distinguish their profession apart from others and make it distinct one from the other.

Implicit in examining professional identity is the assumption that a professional association furthers a particular profession by providing safeguards and controls to protect the profession and the consumer. Greenwood, Suddaby, and Hinings (2002) outlined three major roles of professional associations. The first role is to provide a place for organizations and people to interact and to be collectively represented. This role often assists in defining conduct and behaviour of the membership. Secondly, professional associations shape and define practice, legitimizing the profession. Finally, professional associations monitor compliance of the membership to both normative and sanctioned expectations. These typically include training, education, hiring, and certification practices.

Additionally, professional associations act to safeguard the public interest. Professionalism through credentialing and professionalism by belonging to a formalized group are two common mechanisms to achieve these outcomes. Professionalism through belonging to a formalized group presumes that the profession will monitor its membership and will sanction behaviour not seen to be appropriate to the profession (Everett, 1988; Healy, 2004; Scofield, Berven, & Harrison, 1981). Members require a well-defined system for maintaining standards to be accountable to the profession and to the public. As public confidence increases so does the credibility and recognition of the profession. Credibility and recognition may translate into better income and opportunities for advancement (Leahy, 2009; Leahy, Muenzen, Saunders, & Stauser, 2009).

What can we Learn from Other Professional Associations?

Two Alberta examples of human services professional associations chosen in Alberta illustrate and add to the discussion concerning the struggle to develop a professional identity and association: the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) and the Child and Youth Care Association of Alberta (CYCAA). The ACSW has a long and rich history of accomplishments while CYCAA is a more recently formed professional association. The National Alliance of Disability Support Professionals (NADSP), a U.S. based organization, also warranted investigation. It is similar in values, ethics, and parallels the quest for professional identity comparable to Alberta's disability service workers.

Alberta College of Social Workers

The Alberta College of Social Workers has been in existence since the 1950 and has crusaded for professional recognition of the social work role. Prior to becoming a College, the goals of the Alberta Association of Social Work were to promote professional development, endorse a code of ethics, discuss issues around social work practice, and provide opportunities for networking.

In May of 1999, the Health Professions Act of Alberta (HPA) passed. This omnibus bill covered 30 health professions including social work. The bill came into effect on April 1, 2003. The social work regulations were one of the health professions approved and, consequently, the Association of Social Work became a regulatory college. The HPA required mandatory registration, without exemption, for all individuals calling themselves "social workers" and practicing in Alberta, regardless of job title. This legislation recognized the scope of practice of social work and established "social worker" as a protected title that can only be used by registered social workers. Under the HPA, professional regulatory bodies are called "colleges." With the requirement for mandatory registration, the membership of the ACSW more than quadrupled between 1991 and 2003. Clearly, this example demonstrates the power of a like-minded body of professionals' commitment and perseverance to their accomplishments as a profession.

The Child and Youth Care Association of Alberta

A more recent example, the Child and Youth Care Association of Alberta (CYCAA) illustrates the early development of a professional association. In 1970, an inception meeting was held with only five members in attendance. This group has since become the body that provides standardization, certification, and professionalization of childcare workers in Alberta (CYCAA, 2009). The CYCAA prides itself on providing professional development opportunities, workshops, and conferences, a journal publication, a code of ethics, networking opportunities, and access to current childcare issues. While the work of CYCAA is focused on the issues of children and youth, the overall efforts of this organization have a number of parallels to disability services as disability services workers have similarly expressed the need for ongoing educational opportunities, an ethics code, networking opportunities and access to discuss current issues across the province. A professional association seems to have met this need for a variety of human services professionals and can to do the same for workers in the disability sector.

The National Alliance of Disability Support Professionals

The National Alliance of Disability Support Professionals, an example from the United States, appears to have many similarities to the disability services workforce of Alberta in terms of the individuals they support and the services they provide. Further investigation of this association may provide additional insights and inform the discussion of the issues of professional identity and association. The National Alliance of Disability Support Professionals (NADSP), incorporated in 2005 as a non-profit organization, may warrant further investigation because it is an association for direct support services professionals and provides parallels for the disability services field of Alberta. Professionals in this association are committed to strengthening supports to people with disabilities who rely on human services. This commitment is very similar to the mandate of disability service workers in Alberta.

The developmental history of this association involves analogous issues that the disability services sectors in Alberta are addressing. John F. Kennedy, Jr., president and founder of Reaching Up, Inc. (1989), a non-profit organization devoted to improving educational and career opportunities for direct care workers, joined together with the National Alliance of Direct Support Workers to address the concerns of "low wages, high turnover, minimal training and lack of career opportunities for dedicated, hard working staff" (Kennedy, 1996, p. 1). One of the biggest challenges to providing community supports for people with developmental disabilities is the ability to find, keep, and retain qualified direct support professionals (The Research and Training Center on Community Living, University of Minnesota, 2009). Many of the same concerns voiced by disability service workers in Alberta are addressed by NADSP and are evident in its goals. The NADSP goals are as follows:

1 Enhance the status of direct support professionals.

2 Provide better access for all direct support professionals to high quality educational experiences (e.g., in-service training, continuing, and higher education) and lifelong learning, which enhances competency.

3 Strengthening the working relationships and partnerships between direct support professionals, self-advocates, and other consumer groups and families.

4 Promote systems reform, which provides incentives for educational experiences, increased compensation, and access to career pathways for direct support professionals through the promotion of policy initiatives (e.g., legislation, funding, and practices).

5 Support the development and implementation of a national volunteer credentialing process for direct support professionals.

Recently, NADSP established voluntary national credentialing standards, based on mastery of nationally validated "best practice" competencies and ethics, rigorously assessed both in the classroom and on the job (NADSP, 2000). These standards, competencies and ethics might well provide a foundation for Alberta's professional association.

NADSP advanced the idea that a commitment to their respective fields of continuity of support, ongoing skill acquisition, and responsibility for self-development provide motivation to be recognized, supported, and respected as a professional. NADSP had much success with this challenging undertaking. People come to work from a variety of backgrounds and education. People who are served are diverse, with a wide range of special needs and challenges. The work eludes definition and changes constantly. This commonality is shared with community disability services of Alberta and merits discussing with the professionals of NADSP.

Obstacles to Overcome

One only need look at other professional associations to appreciate the challenges associated with the development, promotion, and sustainability of an association. Crucial to the success of a professional association is an infrastructure to support the association. Basic mechanisms to register and certify members are required to allow the other work of the association to occur. Other, perhaps more lofty, aims of developing and monitoring professional educational activities, updating skills and providing ethical leadership follow. Potential members have to be convinced that there is professional benefit commensurate with the cost of belonging. A vibrant association that promotes ethical practice, protects the public, promotes the profession, and enforces standards of training and ethics is preferred.

A central concern for many community service providers is whether a professional association will result in a unionized workforce. The issues of minimal education requirements and low pay sometimes require disability service workers to undertake more than one position. This can create a working environment open to the efforts of unionization. While it may be a tangential argument, it does need to be addressed in the context of creating and implementing a professional association.

Exposing a Central Issue: Professional Association or Union "The Elephant in the Room"

Even though some professional bodies act as a labor union, the professional body (Barakso & Schaffner, 2008) commonly rejects this descrip-

tion. The common concern about the mixing of union like activities with a professional association is based on the desire for democratic organizations that provide meaningful avenues for participation and networking. Professionalism relates to community activism while unionism remains an issue (Payne, 2002). An example of a social work association that struggled with the issues of unionization is the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). Conflicts around membership policies, specifically the role of the professional association in relation to trade union activities, were inherent in its formation (Payne, 2002). Although this issue remains unresolved, the focus of the proposed association for the community disability services workforce is in the areas of accreditation, code of ethics, professionalism, and policy reform. Other groups have discussed collaborative strategies designed to achieve recognition suggesting that there might be emerging convergences between professionalism and political unionism (Healy & Meagher, 2004).

The issue of professional association and unionization may have to be further exposed in the community disability services sector. While a unionized environment has been successful in some jurisdictions and professions, it does not appear to be a driving force for disability services workers. The initiation of a professional organization is. Unfortunately, when the idea of a professional association was raised several years ago at an annual meeting of ACDS, it was promptly dismissed as an effort to unionize by the service providers. While this concern continued to be raised (ACDSa, April 2009), members addressed in a straightforward, and proactive manner by staying focused on the goal of a professional association rather than the previous reactionary stance taken by service providers.

What Next?

A professional association of like-minded individuals creates an environment of support, allows opportunities for networking, policy updates, educational pursuits all in the recognition of the profession (Thyer, 2008). A focus on these activities, as the core of a professional association, could be the central role for emerging leaders in the disability services sector in creating and sustaining a professional association (ACDS, 2008). Support and guidance is being offered by service provider organizations and ACDS. Workforce 2010 and ACDS have provided the foundation. Disability service workers can capitalize on the momentum and power associated with these two groups to develop an association that shapes and defines the profession (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002).

The recent discussion café (ACDS, 2009b) confirmed the interest in a professional association. Executive directors, managers, board members, and front line staff agreed that the time is right to proceed. Interest and enthusiasm are unquestioned. The next step was to survey the sector more completely, commission by ACDS, the Vocational Rehabilitation Research Institute, (VRRI) conducted a survey called, "Grassroots Professional Association Pulse Check of Alberta's Disability Sector, 2009." Now completed, the participants of the survey offered views on structure, membership, and function of a professional association. Worton (2009) summarized the key points of the feedback. A professional association should include:

- A clear structure with purpose, roles and membership criteria
- Service provision and employee qualification standards
- Professionalization of the sector through representation, professional development opportunities and resources

Expected benefits noted included a sense of professional identity, enhanced public perception, an increasing professional workforce, and increased quality of service and enhanced quality of life for individuals with developmental disabilities.

It seems that the time is right for disability services workforce to have a place to develop and promote a professional identity. That place is a strong and focused professional association. Interest is high as evidenced by a recent organizing meeting in Edmonton, October 2009, where a decision was taken to incorporate as a society. While the membership will most likely begin with workers in the developmental disability field, there is potential to broaden the base of membership to include others professionals who are working with individuals with

a variety of disabilities. One of the challenges of this professional association will be to ensure that they are inviting and appeal to a wide variety of professionals to capitalize on the diversity of the field. Implicit in this challenge will be the establishment of minimum qualifications and standards to become a member and whether membership will be required of those working in the field. While it is suggested that recognized post-secondary training might be the entry level for practice, this does not seem to be a reasonable requirement at this point. Flexibility in requirements for membership may be necessary in the short term in order to establish a strong and viable base; with a view to increasing minimum qualifications over the long term. This will help to guarantee a strong and varied membership; reflective of the reality that disability service workers are in a range of environments and support people with different disabilities and chronic illnesses.

As there appears to be some natural affiliations with NADSP, it is appropriate to initiate contact with this group. They are a young organization who may be very helpful as the Alberta disability services workforce works towards creating a professional association. The learning from NADSP may assist the Alberta group as they move forward.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the growth of the disability service sector from hiring individuals with "two feet and a heartbeat" to individuals choosing to work in this field as a thriving career choice. As a result, disability service workers desire the recognition and identity that a professional association can provide. Although there are challenges such as the concern about professional associations and unions, the value of a professional identity is reflected in the benefits of an association that promotes ethical practice, education, and training for the profession far outweigh these concerns (Patterson, 2009). Learning from other professional associations that have taken up the rally for their cause is highly recommended, especially from the NADSP association. Let us not lose the momentum created by emerging leaders in this disability services sector that can make a professional association a reality.

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